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SUBJECT: A VISIT TO THE TIGRESS OF GAIGORON

Poloff and FSN visited a tiger rehabilitation center in central Primorye July 17 and discussed conservation with its director. His work has saved over two dozen tigers injured by poachers over the past twenty years. Most of the tigers were brought to the center either by hunters, environmentalists, or concerned locals. After physical treatment which requires extensive interaction with humans, they are often unable to re-adapt to life in the wild and are sent to zoos or circuses. Director Victor Yudin is a researcher with the Russian Academy of Science and has been residing in the town of Gaivoron, 250 km north of Vladivostok, for almost 20 years. He is the director and the only employee at the center which is supported by the Institute of Biology and Soil Sciences (IBSS) located in Vladivostok.

Meeting the Tiger Family

In previous years, the center worked with five to seven tigers at a time, though currently it houses only three. An 18-year-old tigress Nyura, is the oldest of all of the tigers ever placed in the center. Together with her mate Kucher, who died recently, she had seven cubs at the center. Their last offspring, male 4-year-old Almaz, still lives with Nyura at the center, but will likely be sent to a zoo as were his brothers and sisters. The third tiger, about one year old, which was found last winter starving in a nearby forest and brought to the center by local hunters, is kept separately and away from people. Yudin is optimistic that he will be able to send him back into the wild -- the absence of human contact is the main condition of tiger's successful adaptation to wildlife. Two black bears, seven lynxes, two raccoon dogs, and a wild cat are among other inhabitants of the center.

Director at Odds With the Mainstream

Yudin often is at odds with the mainstream conservation community. Though funding is increasingly scarce, he rejects any kind of business partnership, which he believes would improve the financial situation but distract him from his scientific studies. He criticizes 'foreign funds' saying that their goal is more self-promotion than conservation, and that World Wildlife Fund employees make financial profit from tigers while doing little to actually protect the species. He proudly refuses grants from international organizations, preferring donations from area residents and visitors. Yudin is also of the feeling that "Americans do not like me" because he vehemently opposes radio tracking collars on tigers as he suspects they disorient the tigers and make it difficult to track prey. He publishes his articles only in Russian and refuses to have them translated into English or to publish them on the Internet.

As a Result, Funding is Particularly Difficult

Partly because he eschews mainstream funding sources and partly because of generally difficult economic times, funding for the center is insufficient. Officially, he is an employee of the IBSS, and regularly receives a modest monthly salary from the

institute. He complains that he does not receive adequate funding from the Academy of Science, and it shows. Cages for the animals were shabby, cramped, and made from various metal remnants. The two-hectare open-air cage where tigers live needs constant attention to prevent tigers from escaping. Gaivoron locals and businessmen from nearby Spassk donate some food for Yudin's animals, as did Consulate visitors. He prohibits photography at the center, and makes additional income from visitors buying photographs of his tigers for 130 rubles (USD 4.50) each.

Comment. Funding for the center is scarce, and Yudin avoids the usual sources of conservation funding. His work, however, is valuable and essential. His center has saved dozens of tigers which would have perished otherwise. It is encouraging that the center still exists and does receive official -- though modest -- funding. However, for a director nearing retirement age, finding someone to eventually replace Yudin may be difficult.

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